

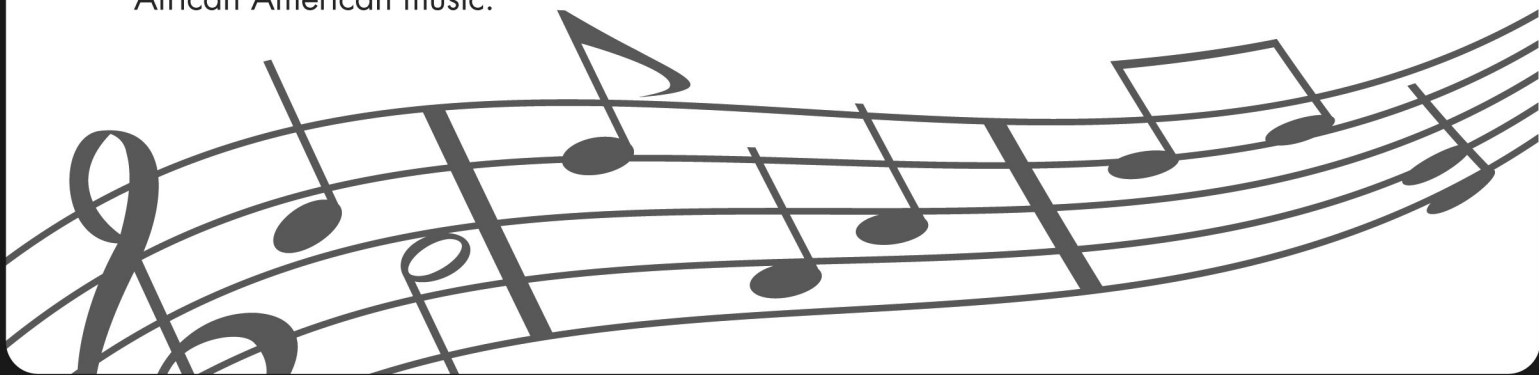
By the Kansas State Historical Society

Eva Jessye: Preserving the Art of African American Music

Long ago, people from Africa were brought to America against their will. They were brought as slaves and forced to work. They were not free. In Africa people often played drums, sang, and danced. As slaves they were not allowed to dance or play drums. Sometimes they could sing as they worked. They sang work songs that were about everyday life. The songs they sang helped them as they worked. Slaves were not given time to worship but they did this in secret meetings. At these meetings they sang worship songs. These songs were about religion and the Bible. The songs were called spirituals. Spirituals became the traditional music of African Americans.



Eva Jessye was born in Coffeyville in 1895. Her ancestors had been slaves. As a child Jessye loved music. Her aunt first taught Jessye about spirituals. She sang them to Jessye at bedtime. Jessye liked to sing them, too. She learned that spirituals were special to African Americans. Later Jessye became a famous singer and choir director. Jessye never forgot about spirituals. She knew that they were important to African Americans. She wanted to help preserve spirituals so people would know about them. She wanted to honor her people by singing spirituals. Her goal was to keep alive this form of African American music.





Eva Jessye met many famous people including President Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor.

Jessye went to college and became a music teacher. She also wrote stories for an African American newspaper. Later Jessye joined a singing group called the Dixie Jubilee Singers. They became very well known. They sang on the radio. They went to Hollywood to sing in

movies. The group was very successful. Soon they became known as the Eva Jessye Choir. They toured in Europe, singing many types of music. Often they sang spirituals. Jessye did not want African Americans to forget their traditional music. She even published a group of songs called "My Spirituals."

As a musical director on stage and in movies Jessye traveled the world, sharing her music and teaching about spirituals. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew about Jessye and her work. In 1963 Reverend King invited the Eva Jessye Choir to sing at his march on Washington, D.C. This march was one of the most important civil rights events in American history. Eva Jessye and her music were a part of it. They were the official choir for the march. African American spirituals have been preserved through the work of Eva Jessye.

